


UW System President Tommy Thompson's Farewell Remarks to the Board of Regents

Friday, February 11, 2022

- Good morning. It has been my great privilege to work with the esteemed members of this Board of Regents over the past 20 months, as well as the outstanding Chancellors of our 13 universities and other leaders around the UW System. I was deeply honored to be asked to lead the University, which has meant so much to me and my family, particularly during what could have been a very dark time for the System in the midst of a pandemic.
 - I also tremendously appreciate the opportunities I've had to meet so many of our exceptional students, faculty, staff, and other members of the university community and to hear your stories. Your commitment and accomplishments are truly impressive, and the state of Wisconsin is definitely better because of you. It only affirms what I have been saying all along, and that is, other than its people, the University of Wisconsin System is one of Wisconsin's greatest assets. It is and should be treasured.
 - As the end of my time as your President draws closer, I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on some of the challenges we've faced together and share a few thoughts about what we have achieved and what comes next.
 - Let me first offer my thanks to former President Ray Cross. When I was given the opportunity to come into this role, Ray offered his full support and the benefit of his experience. Particularly in those early months, when we were all trying to figure out this pandemic, Ray was indefatigable in helping to identify optimum testing strategies to help us move forward to get our students back on campus where they belonged. Ray, I deeply appreciate your advice and your friendship. Thank you.
 - I would also like to extend my congratulations to Jay Rothman, who will succeed me as leader of this magnificent university system. I offer you all best wishes for the coming years, Jay, and hope you bring all your passion, pride, and fortitude to this office. And I urge you to continue to shout from the rooftops – and in boardrooms and public squares and social media and anywhere else you get the chance – the great value this system brings to the people of Wisconsin and beyond.
 - COVID-19 has been a fierce and nasty foe over the past two years. The battle is not yet over, but I am deeply proud of how the UW has taken a stand and helped to beat down this insidious disease.
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- I am proud of how our students, our faculty and staff, and our university communities have done what has been necessary to keep our campuses some of the safest places in Wisconsin, while continuing to provide the quality of education that our students deserve, that parents expect, and that Wisconsin needs.
- When I arrived here in July of 2020, the first big challenge I faced was how to make sure our schools were open and able to offer face-to-face instruction in the fall. I made that tough decision. I was – and I remain – convinced this was the right decision for our students. I must admit, though, not everyone was on board with the call, including a good number of my good friends, our chancellors.
- Once I made the decision, however, I knew the responsibility was now on my shoulders to make sure our campus communities stayed healthy and safe. We set up an operations center, a “war room,” on the 19th floor of Van Hise, very much like I did in Washington, DC, when I was Secretary of Health and Human Services after 9/11. For the past months, we’ve met there every morning to go over maps, news reports, and the latest test results.
- A cornerstone of our “Smash COVID” campaign has been our coordinated strategy of promoting a culture of responsibility, aggressive testing, tough safety protocols, and a vigorous campaign to encourage vaccinations.
- As you know, we did not mandate vaccines in the UW System but our Vax Up! “70 for 70” scholarship initiative resulted in 11 of the 12 participating universities successfully reaching the 70 percent student vaccination threshold. As a result, 70 vaccinated students at those 11 universities received one of our \$7,000 scholarships.
- UW-Madison ran its own vaccination program – and their student vax rate is about 94 percent.
- We continue to advocate – and administer – vaccinations on our campuses because we know vaccinations are the most important thing we can do to keep our students, our employees, and our university communities healthy and safe.
- I’d like to take a moment here to offer a shout-out to comedian Charlie Berens, who generously gave his time to support our “Smash COVID” campaign. His video appearance – and his prowess with a mallet in smashing things with me – really helped to expand the reach of our messaging. Thank you, Charlie!
- I would also like to recognize and thank former Regent Emerita Olivia Woodmansee who served as a student liaison with all our campuses during this campaign – all while finishing up her degree at UW-La Crosse. We couldn’t have done it without you, Olivia.

- Jack Jablonski, associate vice president for public affairs and communications, and his team also played an important role in making this campaign the success it was.
- Not content with keeping just our universities safe, the UW System also led in taking the fight against COVID into every corner of the state. This has been a natural extension of my fervent commitment to the Wisconsin Idea and the notion that the University is – and should be – actively engaged in helping to find solutions to the state’s biggest challenges. The Wisconsin Idea is about far more than just education, and we embrace our role as problem-solvers, and COVID certainly qualifies as a significant problem.
- Drawing on my time as Secretary of Health and Human Services, I reached out to my connections with the Centers for Disease Control – people like Dr. Tony Fauci, Dr. Deborah Birx, Dr. Ryan Westergard, CDC Director Bob Redfield, Surgeon General Jerome Adams, and DHS Deputy Secretary Julie Willems Van Dijk ... and others.
- In November 2020, with the hefty boost of \$50 million from the federal government, we were the first public university system in the country to expand our surge testing capacity to include the public in all of our communities. We continue to provide this resource and to date, we have provided more than two million COVID tests here in Wisconsin.
- Further, more than a thousand of our nursing and pharmacy students answered the call to serve on the front lines in health care facilities and vaccination clinics – truly serving the people of Wisconsin. In return, we offered these students some tuition assistance. I’m very proud of how our Nursing Deans stepped up to meet the challenge.
- We didn’t stop at testing. When vaccines became available, we set up community vaccination clinics on our campuses. As Regent Ashok Rai has noted, the UW System actually may have saved Wisconsin.
- When I vowed to keep the UW open and safe, many said it couldn’t be done –but we succeeded. My top priority has always been our students. In addition to equipping them with a world-class education, we are committed to providing a safe and healthy environment for them and our employees while restoring their college experience, and deploying important new resources to support their emotional and mental well-being.
- When our authority to determine what health and safety measures should be implemented on our campuses was questioned last summer, I took a stand. I immediately countered that any attempt to block that authority was wrong on the law and wrong as a matter of public policy. Furthermore, it was just plain wrong given our highly successful track record for holding our COVID prevalence rates low. For much of this past fall semester, our positivity rates across the System hovered about 1 percent. Our campuses were, in fact, the safest places in Wisconsin.

- This past fall, we delivered 80 percent of our undergraduate courses in person – about equal to our pre-pandemic level – which is something our students very much appreciated. Everywhere I went during our “70 for 70” tour, I repeatedly heard their gratitude and enthusiasm for having their UW experience restored to something that looks much more like normal.
- Another major challenge we faced through all this was the enormous financial hit that our universities were taking.
- Largely due to the broad impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were compelled to make several difficult decisions in order to reduce expenses. This included implementing employee furloughs and other temporary workforce reductions, delaying faculty and staff recruitments, and postponing capital projects and new initiatives.
- We also limited travel, renegotiated service contracts, and made fewer office supply purchases. Sean Nelson, vice president for finance, and his team were critical in making all this work. In another significant move, we terminated our leases at several locations to reduce the number of our offices from five locations to three, as well as to improve the efficiency of operations by not having our employees so spread out.
- As a result of these actions, the UW System’s operating expenses for fiscal year 2020-21 were down \$318.6 million, nearly 6.1 percent, from the previous year.
- Step by step, we identified problems – and we worked to find solutions. Everybody at every one of our 13 universities responded to the challenge, with both grace and determination. Overall, I can confidently say that the UW is now better off.
- Importantly, because of these savings as well as the vital assistance from federal COVID funds, I was able to report to the Board of Regents last October that every single university in our system is financially stable. There were times, I confess, that I wasn’t sure we’d be able to say that. But through incredibly challenging times for campus administrators, faculty, academic and university staff, and our students and their families, we were able to balance the books and formulate viable responses to lagging state investment and a continued freeze in tuition.
- I was also able to report to this Board that while many universities and colleges nationwide had experienced significant falloff in enrollments over the past two years, UW System had outperformed its peers, with our enrollment declining only slightly more than 1 percent as we entered the current academic year. This drop in enrollment is about half the national estimates. A big salute to all the chancellors and their campus teams for helping us stay ahead of the curve.
- Still, it was clear that retaining students would be very difficult unless we could give them the college experience they expected. In large part that meant in-person classes. Like

universities nationwide, we saw a lot of sophomores and juniors who just never came back for their next year.

- At the same time, I've been pleased to report that overall new freshman enrollment across the UW System was up 3.9 percent this past fall, led by UW-Madison – compared to the national decline of 3.1 percent at public four-year campuses.
- We are not sitting on our laurels, however. We continue to reach out to first-generation students, students from underrepresented minorities, students from families with modest financial means, and non-traditional students to make the opportunities and benefits of higher education more broadly available. This benefits all of us, and I am very proud of the work being done all around the UW System to help make this happen.
- Other positive news ... By working with the Legislature and the Governor, UW System's tuition-setting authority has been successfully restored to its rightful place, with this Board of Regents, after nearly a decade. While trust needs to be continuously earned, this same willingness to faithfully engage with policy makers from both political parties has brought the UW System closer to a significantly improved relationship with elected officials.
- In fact, just a couple weeks ago, I was honored to receive a Senate resolution supported by both sides of the aisle, recognizing my service as UW System's interim President. I was proud – and moved – to be back in the Senate chambers.
- Continuing on the state front, we formulated an operational state budget request last year that resulted in no reduction to base funding and a modest increase to establish programs we could all agree would elevate our state. While the UW System would have greatly benefited from further state investment, on balance, the result allows us to continue our mission.
- In addition, our success in the capital budget will allow us to build for the future. Much-needed investments in maintenance and repair funding for our facilities as well as support for moving forward critical projects throughout the UW System will help ensure our students have the important educational opportunities they need to graduate and enter the workforce.
- I'm also pleased to report that earlier this week, the Joint Finance Committee approved our \$8 million request from the JFC supplemental fund. The committee also approved \$5 million for the Higher Education Aids Board administered loan program for nurse educators. These are both very positive developments. Kudos to Jeff Buhrandt, interim vice president for university relations, and his team.
- The \$8 million in additional GPR for the UW System will help support a number of key programs, including the Wisconsin Freshwater Collaborative, UW-Extension state agriculture specialists, Foster Youth Programs, a collaboration between UW-Madison's Nelson Institute

for Environmental Studies and the Federal Department of Defense, and another collaboration between a Water Council and the federal DOD.

- I'm hoping this is the start of a very successful legislative session.
- Looking back, we have accomplished a great deal over the past nearly two years. Without going into too much detail, I'd like to run through some of these successes to remind us all how the UW System has been engaged in improving our operations while continuing to set ambitious goals and working to achieve them.
- As a System, we hired new chancellors at UW-River Falls and UW-Stevens Point, and named an interim chancellor at UW-Whitewater. Last month, we officially launched the search to identify a successor to UW-Madison Chancellor Rebecca Blank.
- We also succeeded in getting a payplan approved for our employees, providing them with 2% pay raises in January of both 2022 and 2023.
- We took a number of steps specifically to help students.
- We expanded our Summer Bridge program, which assists incoming freshmen to make a successful transition to college life. This has been particularly important during the pandemic. Last summer, the number of students who decided to participate in the program – about 2,600 – was more than double the usual pre-pandemic number.
- We launched a new precollege pipeline initiative to help guide high school students in preparing for, applying to, and enrolling in one of our 13 universities. The initiative involves placing student coaches and recruiters in a select number of regional high schools. The initial investment of \$1 million is equally divided among five universities: UW Oshkosh, UW-Parkside, UW-Platteville, UW-Stout, and UW-Whitewater. The pipeline initiative encourages engagement with potential students earlier in the college-going process and also provides additional hands-on support, often helpful for first-generation students.
 - I strongly urge the Board of Regents to look at the successes of these programs. I encourage you to consider not only continuing these initiatives but also expanding them to include more of our universities.
- We took significant steps to help a UW education be more affordable for more students. In November of 2020, we launched the new Regents Opportunity Scholarships, providing \$1 million in scholarships to underrepresented and deserving students at different phases in their higher education journey. In the inaugural round announced last summer, 267 students received a total of more than \$995,000 for the current academic year, with scholarships ranging in size from \$1,000 to \$8,500.

- Acknowledging economic pressures amid the pandemic, we waived electronic application fees at 10 of our 13 universities. The no-cost EApp now saves students \$25 per application. I should note that this was very well received by students and the number of applications we've received has gone up. We also extended the suspension of requiring ACT/SAT scores as part of the admissions process through 2024-25. Halting the requirement was originally instituted early in the pandemic.
- Last September, UW System and the Wisconsin Technical College System signed a historic agreement that makes it easier for students to transfer up to 72 credits between the two higher education systems. This student-centered agreement will improve the quality of higher education in Wisconsin and is a win for students and our two systems.
- And, as we heard from Vice President Anny Morrobel-Sosa in yesterday's Education Committee, UW System and the WTCS are taking another positive step for students by introducing a guaranteed credit transfer pathway opening the doors to STEM degrees. Degrees in key areas like biology, chemistry, and computer science are what modern employers tell us they are looking for. This new agreement, guided by Carleen Vande Zande, associate vice president for academic programs and faculty advancement, means we're providing students with greater certainty of having the right STEM-related knowledge and skills to attract the right employment opportunity.
- By next month, there will be many more opportunities for students between the UW and the technical schools. This is another giant step to help both UW System and WTCS produce better educational outcomes for students – and it reflects greater cooperation between our two systems, which benefits all of us.
- We introduced a new online behavioral health tool, SilverCloud, that offers self-guided programs for anxiety, depression, stress, insomnia, and resilience. SilverCloud is available to faculty, staff, and students at any time, on any device, and at no cost. We also advocated for additional state funding to hire more counselors to support the growing demand for mental health services on campus. John Achter, wearing his student behavioral health coordinator hat, has been vital. I must also give a shout-out to our Senior Student Affairs Officers across the System, our SSAO's, who were taxed and challenged over the past couple of years in ways we never could have predicted. Thank you for your tireless support.
 - This is a need that's going to continue to grow, and the University is going to have to find a way to get funding to support these vital services.
- We created a new Equity, Diversity and Inclusion office at the System level that reports directly to the president. Through this office, we can develop and implement a systemwide strategic vision that cultivates inclusive and supportive learning and working environments throughout the System. As part of these efforts, this past year, for the first time, UW System campus senior diversity officers were convened to begin to develop a systemwide approach to equity, diversity, and inclusion.

- As we heard in two separate committee meetings yesterday, we will be launching a pilot program in which EAB's Academic Planner tool will be installed at three of our campuses (UW Oshkosh, UW-Platteville, and UW-River Falls). UW-Parkside and UW-Milwaukee already use Academic Planner, which provides course-to-graduation mapping that our students are requesting to assure they can graduate on-time and on-budget. UW System Administration will fund the pilot program, integrating the Academic Planner tool into our existing EAB Navigate tool. We've been using EAB Navigate at 12 of our 13 universities since 2018. It's a tool that helps connect students to administrators, faculty, academic support staff, and advisors – something which unexpectedly became extremely important during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- UW System successfully and safely brought back precollege and youth programs to our campuses last summer after widespread cancellation of such programs in 2020 due to COVID. We supported campuses in developing mitigation protocols and planning guidance in order to provide a safe environment for minors to participate in youth camps, activities, and programs on campus.
- As you heard in yesterday's Audit committee in a report from Prenicia Clifton, our youth protection and compliance administrator, we are also developing administrative policy and best practices to address Youth Protection and Compliance, empowering our institutions to implement the minimum youth protection standards required for minors on our campuses whether activities are sponsored by the university or organized by others.
- As part of our commitment to best practices in financial processes and accountability, we also moved forward in several important arenas.
- Last October, we moved all UW System employees to a single payroll cycle. Without a hiccup, approximately 33,000 employees transitioned from monthly to biweekly pay as part of our efforts to make our previously complicated and complex payroll system more efficient and consistent.
- Late last year, about 22,000 of our 29,000 non-faculty employees around the UW System got new titles, as part of our Title and Total Compensation program (or TTC), which first got underway in 2017. This comprehensive update of all our job titles and descriptions is the first such update in at least 30 years. TTC is straight-up good business practice. Hats off to Dan Chanen, associate vice president and chief human resources officer.
- UW System had been trying to get these two things completed for years – the payroll cycle adjustment and TTC – but I insisted that we finally get this across the finish line. We had great employees helping us all along the way but I'd like to give a special shout-out to Stacey Rolston, our (interim) Executive Director of UW-Shared Services.
- Last April, we implemented Procure-to-Pay (or P2P) and ShopUW-Plus, the latest step in our efforts to refine UW System's business practices. With this implementation, turnaround time

on purchase order approvals has dropped from an average of 10 days to just a single day. Since implementation and through mid-January, more than 143,000 purchase orders have been created for more than \$628 million.

- We moved forward with the Administrative Transformation Program (ATP), an ambitious back-office overhaul to rebuild human resources, finance, and research administration systems and services across the UW System. Further, we expanded the program's scope to include every institution in the system and called for a quicker timeline for completion. At the time I came in, the intent was for ATP to be implemented at Madison and System Administration first, before expanding to the other universities, and the original timeline for overall completion was five years. We needed to do better. I called for ATP to be applied at all universities at the same time and within three years. We have now charted and shared major events on the ATP timeline to make sure we hit these goals, and we're doing it under budget.
- The goal of ATP is to reduce the complexity of the current administrative environment and refocus valuable staff time on UW's missions of education, research, and outreach. To make this a reality, we are working to streamline policies, standardize processes, and implement new, best-in-class technology to support essential functions. I would like to credit Rob Cramer, interim vice chancellor for finance & administration at UW-Madison, and Jim Langdon, UW System's vice president for administration, for their strong leadership on this project.
- We also took action on a number of fronts to help seek solutions to some of Wisconsin's more pressing challenges.
- We sought and received state support to add 20 additional county-based agriculture positions in the Division of Extension at UW-Madison, as part of our longstanding commitment to support Wisconsin agriculture.
- In December, the Board of Regents unanimously approved a new policy to develop strong, collaborative relationships with the Native Nations in Wisconsin. Under the policy, the UW System will consult with tribes on numerous issues affecting their communities. It's a giant step forward ... but it's only the first step. We cannot be satisfied until more Native American students enroll in and graduate from our universities. I appreciate the vital roles played by Dr. Jennings, UW System's Native American Student Success Coordinator and Tribal Liaison, General Counsel Quinn Williams, and Vice President Jim Langdon in moving these efforts forward.
 - I should tell you that it bothers me how many of our campuses are located on ancestral land of these Nations and that we still haven't fulfilled our responsibility to provide a university education to anyone who wants or needs it – including members of Wisconsin's tribes. I urge this Board to consider giving a scholarship opportunity to

every tribe, to help encourage the academic success of Native Americans within our universities. Of course, we should only pursue this after consultation with the tribes.

- As part of efforts to educate people in prison and reduce recidivism, the UW System also advocated for state investment in a prison education initiative.
- While the initiative was not funded in the current state budget, the University of Wisconsin Prison Education Initiative was recently awarded up to \$5.7 million in grant funding to work with the Department of Corrections to teach employable skills to prisoners while incarcerated and then support them through program completion and career placement upon release.
- I would like to thank Governor Evers for his support for this initiative.
- The funding for the Prison Education Initiative is part of the state's first round of Workforce Innovation Grants, supported by \$100 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act funds.
- The initiative has also received support from the Ascendium Education Group, who awarded UW System an additional \$150,000.
- I appreciate the hard work on this by Anny Morrobel-Sosa, vice president for academic and student affairs, attorney Steve Hurley, and Peter Moreno.
 - This is one of my real passions, to turn a prison into a college. It's clear to me now that our state has not done enough to give prisoners a second chance, and it's equally clear that the UW has an opportunity to offer a solution by helping to break the cycle of recidivism.
 - According to the Department of Corrections, of the roughly 8,000 people leaving prison annually in Wisconsin, 40 percent are back behind bars within three years. And this comes at an annual cost of about \$35,000 a head.
 - Yes, a significant number of people in prison belong there. Absolutely. But others – maybe as many as half of them – could go on to be productive members of society. If we could provide the opportunity for people who are incarcerated to get more education, to build their workforce possibilities, that could improve individual lives, reduce recidivism, strengthen Wisconsin's economy, and ultimately save taxpayer dollars.
 - It wouldn't be cheap, but like welfare reform, it would pay for itself in the end.
 - I believe this initiative is potentially a big problem solver – and that is what the University of Wisconsin System, and our commitment to the Wisconsin Idea, are all about.

- Since day one, I have worked tirelessly to implement these and other necessary reforms to support our students and strengthen our System.
- As we look ahead, I am convinced the UW System – which recently celebrated its 50th anniversary – has a distinct and vital mission. Our universities can and must prepare people to make a good living, and also prepare them well for life as contributing citizens in a globally involved democracy.
 - As an aside, I was actually in the Legislature 50 years ago. I never would have imagined back then that I'd someday be leading this incredible system!
- What we do here in the UW System is vital for all of us. I am wholeheartedly convinced that a college education, a college degree, has never been more important, both for the good of an individual but also for the good of our communities, our state, our country, and the world.
- Everywhere I go, every speech I make, I talk about the importance of a college education. Especially at a time when there are those who question the value of a college education, or even speak out against it, I hope this Board continues to publicly embrace our mission and make your voices heard.
- Here in Wisconsin, we're extremely fortunate. We have a public university system that touches communities all across this great state, and 13 universities that offer top-notch opportunities for education, research, and service that make us the envy of peers all around the country, and yes, even the world.
- We have a university system with outstanding chancellors and well-respected professors and staff who nurture and challenge our students to become better versions of themselves, who encourage and lead groundbreaking research efforts, creative intellectual or artistic endeavors, and entrepreneurial opportunities.
- In our UW classrooms and laboratories, students hone their critical thinking and communication skills, their problem-solving ability, their ability to adapt to change, and their comfort in working alongside diverse groups of people. Employers need people with these kinds of skills in order to grow Wisconsin. We know this because they tell us so, and they want lots more.
- Over the last 10 years, we have sent more than 36,000 graduates each year out into Wisconsin and the world to make a difference and to succeed. As Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, "We cannot build the future for our youth – but we can build our youth for the future." And yes, that's what we do.
- We continue to stand by our commitment to serve our state and local communities by graduating more students into areas of high state need, such as science, math, healthcare, engineering, biology, computer science, and water research.

- We are an economic engine that keeps Wisconsin humming, powering Wisconsin businesses not just for today but years in the future.
- Our UW universities all across this state produce innovation, the new ideas that drive advances in technology and industry, producing solutions for our cultural and economic challenges, and offering the potential to improve our quality of life.
- Driven by our commitment to the Wisconsin Idea, we are indeed here to serve.
- So, let me say this. At a time when the State continues to see surpluses at record levels, it's time to think about record investments.
- It can start by investing in higher education to help businesses get access to the talent they need to prosper. We all know there is no greater talent magnet than our UW universities. Nearly 90 percent of our in-state graduates stay in Wisconsin five years after earning a degree. The UW is also our best shot at attracting out-of-state residents and students to come to Wisconsin.
- It can start by investing in the education needed to meet the demand for more nurses, more engineers, and more educators. We desperately need more teachers to meet the demands in these fields.
- It can start by providing prison education to address our problems of recidivism and to provide workforce support.
- These are all things we should be working toward now so we can avoid continuing to face these problems in the future. It's bigger than just the UW. It's designed to help every Wisconsinite.
- To serve has always been at the heart of who I am. I love Wisconsin!
- While I am stepping down from the UW System next month, I am not stepping down from Wisconsin – and I will continue to do what I have always done. I will do whatever I can to make this state the best it can be. And that includes continuing to advocate for the University of Wisconsin.
- While I did not seek this responsibility, it has been extremely rewarding to lead and work alongside truly remarkable people at UW System Administration and our universities. On the front lines of this undertaking, the UW System enjoys the great benefit of outstanding leadership from our Chancellors, who are focused on delivering the best outcomes for their students, their communities, and this state.

- The University of Wisconsin has great people and great talent, and it's been an honor to work alongside you. You've always got the best interests of the people of Wisconsin and the University at the center of what you do. I would be remiss if I didn't recognize your patience, your dedication, your hard work, and your commitment to public service. I salute you and I thank you.
- The University and people of Wisconsin are also indebted to the dedicated men and women who serve as Regents on this Board, and I greatly appreciate this opportunity to work alongside you. I want to thank you for the confidence you placed in me to lead, with special appreciation to former Regent President Andrew Petersen, former Regent Vice President Michael Grebe, current Regent President Ed Manydeeds, and current Regent Vice President Karen Walsh for recruiting me to serve in this capacity.
- I am grateful to you for allowing me to lead in the only way I know how – with all my heart and the deepest affection for this state and its many gifts.
- When I agreed to lead our System, I did so knowing two things: One, that I was needed, and two, it would be temporary. I have been encouraged and heartened that so many of my fellow citizens and university colleagues have taken the time to personally express their gratitude for my willingness to lead an organization that has been so instrumental in my personal and professional life, and to the life of Wisconsin.
- We need to make clear to all that the University of Wisconsin System should not be considered an expenditure, but rather a vitally important investment in the future. If we truly want to grow Wisconsin, there's no better place to start than with the UW System. The returns on investment we offer are not just measured in dollars but in richer, fuller lives for our people and our communities. That IS the Wisconsin Idea.
- I want to close with one of my favorite memories from my time as President. Last May, I received an award from the UW-La Crosse Student Association, the Higher Education Advocate Award. In presenting the award, then-student president Cate Wiza noted how strong leadership has helped her campus – and the entire system – to successfully navigate through a global pandemic.
- I have been fortunate to receive a good number of awards during my life. But this was the first award I've ever received from students – and that means a great deal to me. Because the students, and their great passion to learn, to engage, and to make a difference – that's really why we're all here.
- But while it's my name on the award, I recognize that it really belongs to all of us. When it comes down to it, I have simply been the quarterback on this team. I am surrounded by highly capable, thoughtful, and dedicated leaders in their own areas who actually move the ball and protect our enterprise.

- If I had to personally figure out how to combine multiple payroll systems into a bimonthly payroll plan, we'd all still be waiting for our first paycheck! If I had to strengthen our student behavioral health efforts, I would have shared my mobile number with every student on our campuses and encouraged them to call me, at any hour, if they needed to talk to someone.
- In effect, I've led leaders. It's been my job to make sure they are reliably provided with the foundation and resources they need to do their jobs. Throughout my remarks today, I have tried to call out many of these leaders by name, even while recognizing there are many others who also play vital roles. There are far too many to mention.
- Finally, I came here to serve as your president with an ambitious agenda of things to accomplish – not just to smash COVID but to make the University of Wisconsin System even better. As you've heard here today, the list of things we have actually accomplished over the past 20 months is long, and I think it's impressive.
- One other key issue I believe we have demonstrated is the purpose and relevance of a system. Many of the things we have accomplished – and will continue to accomplish – are at the service of our universities. The system exists to empower the chancellors and all our universities to do what they do best.
- Educating students, building Wisconsin, and solving problems. That is what truly gives life to the Wisconsin Idea.